

bottled affection by hexicity

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Summary:

“God, no, but you—you’re—“ Mike heaves an enormous sigh and raises his eyes to the heavens, “you seem *stressed*. And I was trying to be nice and let you talk about how my sister dumped you because you picked me up at school and made me soup, but whatever, I’ll never try to be nice to you ever again.”

Steve isn’t sure if he should be annoyed or touched or amused, so he just tosses a pillow at Wheeler and lands it square in his face, which makes the kid give an indignant, hoarse yell.

bottled affection

Steve psyches himself up for a good ten minutes to start his required reading.

Taking night classes at Hawkins Community College wasn't exactly the plan that bright-eyed, freshman year Steve Harrington had imagined four years ago. He'd pictured himself as a quarterback at whichever university managed to impress him the most with their offers and prizes. Maybe he'd be envied by his team at first, after a record-breaking number of touchdowns and tackles, but soon enough their jealousy would turn to respect.

Steve wishes he could blame the inter-dimensional monster from last year on his dashed dreams, but really it's all on him. Sure, he'd stopped caring about football after coming face to face with about a thousand teeth and spindly claws that left grooves on his baseball bat. But more than that, he'd never really cared about where he went or what he did. College in general had started to seem like a pointless endeavor until recently, and now he wants to do it right.

But reading is hard. So Steve is a little relieved when the phone rings right as he's past the first page.

The clock over the oven tells him it's too early to be the kids. They've still got a good five hours until their weekend begins. His best guess is between the detached coldness of his father checking in or the mindless automation of telemarketers.

Either way, he'll be back to his book in less than sixty seconds.

"Steve?"

He frowns at the voice, which comes through the line as something just above a whisper and belongs to someone he already ruled out of possible callers.

"*Wheeler?*" He leans against the kitchen wall and looks back at the clock. 9:47, which means Mike should be in third period. "You know, it's not great to develop a habit of skipping class as a freshman. That

should wait until at least mid-sophomore year.”

“I’m not skipping. I’m at the nurse.”

There are two things Steve finds alarming right now. The first is that Mike Wheeler is even calling him at all. If Steve were to rate the kids by how likely they were to personally call the Harrington household for anything besides an emergency, the scale would range from Dustin to Mike.

The second is that Mike didn’t respond with an insult or taunt. Steve tries to think recall a time where Wheeler didn’t immediately fire back at Steve’s jeering and he comes up empty.

“The nurse, huh?” Steve tries to keep his tone neutral, light. “Get into a fight?”

“Yeah, I punched Dustin for suggesting I should call you.” Mike mutters resentfully, and that’s all it takes to lessen Steve’s near panic into a heavy anxiety. “I’m sick, asshole. I need someone to come get me. My parents can’t.”

That explains why his voice is so rough around the edges. It explains everything, really. The Wheelers were never really available to give Nancy rides to and from anything, what with Ted Wheeler always being at work and Karen Wheeler always being at weekly book club meetings or salon visits. It makes sense that Mike is abandoned at school with whatever he’s got. Fucked up, but makes sense.

Steve leans just slightly to grab his keys from the counter.

“First of all, if you want my help you shouldn’t start by calling me an asshole. Second, I *just* graduated, Wheeler, and I’m not sure how I feel about walking back into that prison.” He sighs dramatically and peeks into the cupboard beside the fridge, straining against the curly phone cord’s restricted length to see if they have anything resembling medicine. He spots some promisingly bright boxes and satisfies himself with the fact that he can make a fantastic bowl of soup, at least.

“So are you coming or not?” Mike snaps impatiently.

“Yes, dipshit. Give me ten minutes.”

He makes it there in eight minutes, which is impressive considering the fact that it always took a minimum of twenty when he was in school. That’s with the added trip to pick up Nancy every morning, though.

Even after that was no longer a necessary trip, Steve had been late nearly every day until graduation. Usually that was due to a general unraveling of his motivation. Sometimes it was due to sleeping in.

He pulls in to the guest parking, which feels ridiculously good. The ugly building that looms before him, all grey slab and tinted windows, is now just a temporary stop. An errand. He’s a *guest*, not a slave.

He thinks he might frame the guest sticker that gets plastered to his shirt. The satisfied smile on his face is wiped clean the moment he lays eyes on Mike Wheeler, slumped dejectedly on a blue vinyl cot.

He looks up at Steve through heavy-lidded eyes, pitching the most pathetic attempt at annoyance his way. The usual energy that thrums within all the kids seems temporarily depleted, leaving Mike with barely enough energy to lift his hand and stifle a cough. Steve has the usual urge to ruffle the kid’s hair, as he does whenever any of them look anything less than happy, but him and Wheeler aren’t quite there yet and his hair is messy enough already.

“You look dynamite, kid.” Steve greets him cheerfully, knowing that acting anything but content will provoke Mike into expending his minimal energy on picking a fight. “You ready to go?”

“The nurse has to check you out.” Mike murmurs tiredly as he reaches for his backpack.

“Well I hope she likes what she sees.” Steve jokes, and Mike immediately groans unreasonably loud. “That was a great joke, Wheeler. Intended to make you feel better.”

“I think it made me feel worse.”

It’s a good thing Mike is a freshman now. If Steve walked into

Hawkins Middle and tried to take a student, he'd have to show some kind of proof that he and Mike are really related, like he's claiming. But at Hawkins High, the nurse doesn't even look up from the paperback novel with swirling font and a bare-chested man with more abdominal muscles than there are in a real human man.

That leaves Steve with the simple task of grabbing Wheeler's shockingly heavy backpack and escorting him out into the parking lot.

Steve watches Wheeler automatically reach for the backseat handle, his usual spot, and then hesitate when he realizes that, for the first time, it's just Mike and Steve. Steve and Mike. The last two dudes on earth who would willingly spend time alone together.

It's not that Steve doesn't like Wheeler. He *does*. He thinks the kid is brave and fierce and loyal, everything good about his older sister and without the painful reminders. Even if every word out of his mouth is coated in ten layers of sarcasm when addressing Steve, Mike is a good kid. A great kid.

It's just that Steve and Wheeler coexist best when the other kids are there. The other kids accepted Steve as their new protector long ago, on day one. But Mike Wheeler has a limited number of spots available for people he trusts, justifiably so, and Steve is still in the interview process.

But Mike, after a moment, slides into the passenger seat and buckles up. Steve nods, satisfied, and starts the car.

For three agonizing minutes Steve drives in complete silence. He's never liked the quiet, which is why so many of his weekends were spent drowning out the gaping emptiness of his house with pulsing music and yelling teens. Right now, though, the radio doesn't seem like the best option. Wheeler has an elbow propped against the car door and a hand cradling his head.

"Headache?" He asks, and Mike merely hums a response. "Lucky for you I have a shit load of Tylenol at the Harrington household. Next time I get hit in the head with a three pound plate, I'll be prepared."

“We’re going to *your* house?” Mike murmurs hesitantly, looking over with apparent surprise.

“Yeah remember that time I left you on your own? And you encouraged Max to hijack a car to save your girlfriend?”

“You didn’t leave us alone you *passed out*.”

Steve takes a hand off the wheel to point a finger at Mike. “And you could too, if you’re left without supervision.”

“I’m not five. And it’s just a cold.” Mike huffs, his voice breaking a little and careening into a cough. Steve’s heart does a mini version of what it did when they were in the tunnels, the little missed beat whenever any of the kids are within arms reach of danger. *This isn’t danger*, Steve reminds himself.

“I think of you as about seven.” Steve responds. “Will is probably the only one who acts his age. Maybe Lucas, occasionally, but normally I’d also peg him as seven. Dustin is like, three.”

Mike goes back to gazing forlornly out the window, like he’s being carted off to prison. Steve tries to recall a time where he’s been more uncomfortable than this very moment.

“So uh, how was school?”

“You mean for the two hours I was there?” Mike mutters as he angles the air vent pumping warm air in his direction. He turns up the intensity, probably both to warm up and to drown out Steve’s forced conversation. “It was terrible. I couldn’t breathe and El thought I was dying.”

There it is. The way his voice thaws out the moment Eleven’s name leaves his tongue. The first sign of the heart that sits in little Wheeler’s chest. If he’s gonna get Wheeler to talk, he’s gonna need to bring up a certain little telepath. Unfortunately, they’re already in the driveway by the time Steve makes this discovery, so he postpones it.

For now he has to figure out where Wheeler would be comfortable. Well, not comfortable. Less uncomfortable.

He unlocks the front door and briefly considers telling Wheeler to head down the hall to the guest bedroom, but he vetoes it pretty quickly. The guest room is bare and bleak and the pathetically small television doesn't even work. Wheeler doesn't need to be even *more* miserable.

Then there's the possibility of letting Mike take his own bed, because it is a *bed*, but it's too weird. Plus, he doesn't want germs in his living space.

"If you go upstairs you'll find the living room. Take the couch, there should be blankets and stuff in the closet by the television." Steve drops his keys on the front table and watches Mike shift uncomfortably by the door, hesitant. The kid will walk blindly through living tunnels infested with face-eating monsters, but walking through the Harrington household unaccompanied is just too much, apparently.

But Steve gets it. He use to attend fancy business functions with his parents—back when his dad still cared about feigning the appearance of being a family man—and he was always banished to an awkward upstairs gathering of his father's coworkers' children.

Being in someone else's home is always slightly uncomfortable at first, but that hadn't stopped the rest of the little demons from raiding his home on a weekly basis. Lucas even invited himself to explore Steve's closet a few weeks ago, and ever since then he hasn't been able to find his favorite blue windbreaker.

"Or," Steve offers casually, "you can come pick what you want to eat."

Mike darts forward at the suggestion, following Steve into the kitchen like a duckling. He takes the initiative to poke his head into the large freezer and emerges a second later with two frozen pan pizzas.

"Yeah, no."

"I should get to pick. I'm the guest."

"You're the *patient*," Steve pinches the bridge of his nose, "and when

you're sick, you eat soup. Or popsicles. Not pizza."

"Do you have any popsicles?" Mike asks, looking as though he's genuinely considering it. Which is bad, because,

"No." Steve admits. Mike automatically turns back to the pizza and rips into the box, eliciting a groan from Steve. "Okay, now I can't put that back in the freezer."

"Why would you? It's lunch."

"It's like, ten in the morning. And I make a really good chicken soup, Wheeler."

"Does this have stuffed crust?"

Steve sighs. He doesn't *want* to deploy this method, but he also doesn't want a fourteen year old puking on his couch from greasy freezer pizza. So he sighs and drops the bomb.

"I made this soup for Eleven, once. When Hopper asked me to watch her. She liked it."

Mike finally stop pulling the pizza from the box and fixes Steve with a threatening glare. The glare lasts all of two seconds before he has to sacrifice his cross demeanor and cover a hacking cough with his hand, which is gross. When he catches his breath again, he drops the pizza box on the counter and collapses onto a barstool.

"You better not poison me."

Twenty minutes later they're both on Steve's corduroy couch, Wheeler sluggishly emptying his bowl and Steve occasionally letting him pluck a pepperoni off the two slices of pizza he's forced to eat.

Steve steals occasional glances at Wheeler while they watch *Taxi*. He definitely isn't faking—though that was never a concern, because the kid clearly wasn't planning on spending the day with Steve and still doesn't seem entirely thrilled about it.

Steve's given up on telling Wheeler not to cough into his hands or rub at his nose with his sleeve, resigned to the fact that his house will

have to be quarantined for the next week. He watches the kid go from sitting rigidly on his side of the couch, to slumping slightly against the provided pillow, to finally stretching out until he's laying with his heels only inches from Steve's leg.

He's almost certain Mike is dozing off when the kid speaks suddenly, clearing his throat before any sound can be comprehended.

"Thanks."

Steve stares at the kid, who's pointedly not looking at him. He's pretending to be fascinated by a commercial for weight loss supplements, but Steve can hear the sincerity in his voice. Sincerity that's, albeit, matched with reluctance.

Still. It's nice. Nice enough that Steve resists the urge to tease him.

"Don't worry about it, kid." Steve shrugs. "Part of the job."

"Y'know," Mike sits up a little and finally looks at Steve, his gaze serious and unrelenting, "you don't have to do stuff for us all the time. Driving us around and stuff."

"Forces me to keep the car clean." Steve responds easily. This conversation comes up sometimes, usually brought up by a timid Will whenever Steve takes them to the arcade or the movies or the comic store. He has a whole list of responses ready.

"Nancy thinks you do things for us to cope." Mike says bluntly. Steve breathes an uneasy laugh, shaking his head slightly.

"Nancy worries a little too much. And we haven't talked in like, a few weeks. Nothing more than small talk." Steve ignores the accompanying ache in his chest.

Truthfully, he's been dying to talk to Nancy recently. Ask her if she's having trouble sleeping, ask if she keeps a weapon handy at all times, ask if she worries every single time one of the kids walks out the front door.

"You can call her, you know. I think she'd be happy."

“You need anything?” Steve abruptly sits up and gestures towards the mess of supplies on the coffee table, where a half-drained cup of orange juice and scattered tissues are just waiting to be cleaned up—with gloves and a mask, of course—so Steve can stop listening to a fourteen year old analyze his current array of problems. “Orange juice? Comics? Different topic of conversation?”

“Oh my God,” Mike huffs, “I don’t know how Dustin does this, you’re so stubborn.”

“Does *what*?”

“He said sometimes you would give him advice. About how to, y’know, deal with stuff.”

Steve is lost. “You want *advice* from me right now?”

“God, no, but you—you’re—“ Mike heaves an enormous sigh and raises his eyes to the heavens, “you seem *stressed*. And I was trying to be nice and let you talk about how my sister dumped you because you picked me up at school and made me soup, but whatever, I’ll never try to be nice to you ever again.”

Steve isn’t sure if he should be annoyed or touched or amused, so he just tosses a pillow at Wheeler and lands it square in his face, which makes the kid give an indignant, hoarse yell.

“Listen,” Steve snaps his fingers in Wheeler’s face to reclaim his attention, “that’s not your problem to worry about. Or fix. I do things for you and your demonic friends because I actually *like* being around you. Okay?”

“That’s so gross.”

“You’re so gross, breathing your disgusting germs all over my couch.”

Wheeler sets him with a dead-eyed glare as he defiantly coughs directly into his hands, which he then uses to snatch the remote from Steve and change from *Taxi* to *Miami Vice*.

“That’s obviously fake blood.” Mike murmurs as he watches a criminal go down with a splatter of unconvincing red, his tone

unimpressed. But Steve knows that Wheeler isn't commenting on the special effects of midday reruns because he really truly cares.

It's an olive branch. A conversation that is neither hostile nor uncomfortable.

"The guns are fake, too." Steve adds idly. "Look at that, I mean come on. It's just a painted super soaker."

Mike makes a noise somewhere between a cough and a laugh. Best case scenario, it's a laugh covered up by a cough. Worst case scenario, it's tuberculosis.

But Steve thinks Wheeler will be fine. Eventually, after another hour of criticizing everything cable has to offer, Steve gets up to refill his drink and returns to find Mike fully slumped against his pillow, eyelids fluttering as he dozes.

Steve carefully drapes one of the discarded blankets over the sleeping entity of evil and quietly sinks into the adjacent armchair. He cracks open his assigned reading again, and if Wheeler ever jolts in his sleep, Steve just reads a few paragraphs out loud until the kid stills again.

At exactly three in the afternoon, the hunk of cheap plastic that is the kids' main method of contact crackles into life and Steve has to lunge for it and hurry into his bedroom.

"Steve!" Dustin's voice greets him the second he pushes down the side button. "Is Mike there? Is he okay?"

"He's *sleeping*." Steve hisses. "You almost woke him up, dipshit. What do you want?"

"We're coming over." Lucas chimes in. "We're bringing our campaign materials."

"Look, he can't be your dragon master—"

"Dungeon master!"

"—he needs to sleep. And if you all catch what he's got there's no

way in hell I'm dealing with all of you. This has been enough, thanks."

"He's not the DM, stupid." Lucas says this with enough condescension for Steve to temporarily feel genuinely stupid, though there's no way for him to understand the inner workings of their minds. "It's a surprise for him. We made our own campaign."

"It sucks!" Dustin says proudly.

Steve sighs and pokes his head out, watching Mike shift slightly in his heavy sleep. Maybe the best way to convince the kid that he's fine, that he's *coping*, is to prove he doesn't mind being around the little brats via letting them infiltrate his home and yell about goblins.

Or maybe he just wants Wheeler to feel better. Either way, Steve isn't finishing his book today.

Author's Note:

for some reason i really love the way mike and steve interact and i wish there had been more in the show so...voila. if u wanna talk or leave a prompt u can talk to me on tumblr @richieapologist! thank u so much for reading!!